

Existential psychotherapy: An introductory overview (*)

ERNESTO SPINELLI (**)

INTRODUCTION

Rather than being a particular technique or method of therapy, existential psychotherapy more than anything else provides therapists with a set of foundational principles that serve as guidelines and ‘meaning structures’ which underpin their practice (Ruitenbeek, 1962). An important recent text by Mick Cooper, *Existential Therapies* (2003) provides a concise and clear account of both the diversity of existential therapies and those foundational structures which unite them. Similarly, texts such as Hans W. Cohn’s *Existential Thought and Therapeutic Practice* (1997), Gion Condrau’s *Martin Heidegger’s Impact on Psychotherapy* (1998), Simon du Plock’s *Existential Case Studies* (1997), van Deurzen-Smith’s *Everyday Mysteries* (1997) Strasser and Strasser’s *Existential Time-Limited Psychotherapy* (1997), and my own *Tales of Un-knowing* (1997) and *The Mirror and The Hammer* (2001) provide readers with various attempts to configure existential-phenomenological theory into psychotherapeutic practice.

If we accept that there exists a number of foundational principles and assumptions underlying existential phenomenology which are shared and to which existential psychotherapists subscribe, then it might be advantageous to first state these principles and assumptions. Here is my phenomenologically focused suggestion regarding what would be this list of chosen pivotal principles:

1. That a primary invariant aspect of human existence is the attempted construction of meaning – no matter how limited or inadequate – upon all reflections on our lived experience.
2. That all human meanings are intentionally derived in that meaning emerges from inter-relational acts upon, and reactions to, the “stimuli” of the world.
3. That because they are intentionally derived, no meanings concerning any aspect of self/world inter-relations can ever be complete or fully “captured”.
4. That both the attempt to accept or to avoid the multiple implications of the above point (3), as well as the persistent tendency to “fix” or “capture” meaning in spite of its intentional basis, provoke unease and insecurity in a being’s self/world inter-relations.
5. That the existential underpinnings to the above point (4) lie in the awareness of the general time-limited or temporal constraints upon our intentional “meaning-making”, as well as the inability to know the specific

(*) The following paper is extracted from Chapter 8 of *The Interpreted World: an introduction to phenomenological psychology*, 2nd edition, 2005, London: SAGE.

(**) School of Psychotherapy and Counselling, Regent’s College, London, United Kingdom.

temporal constraints and parameters that situate each of us as an individual being “in the world”.

Considered from a therapeutic focus, these five principles, taken separately and together, provide us with numerous practice-based implications and applications which, in turn, can be highlighted as critical features of existential therapeutic practice.

What is initially pivotal for the reader interested in existential psychotherapy to understand is that rather than stress yet another standard technique or set of practices, representatives of this approach hold that any over-emphasis on technique, or on practice in general, is one of the main obstacles to understanding the client and, thus, to any truly long-lasting outcome of therapy. It is the basic view of existential psychotherapists that ‘it is not the understanding that follows technique, but the technique that follows understanding’ (Misiak & Sexton, 1973: 87).

GENERAL EMPHASES IN EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

As, I hope, will become apparent, if there is an ultimate aim to existential psychotherapy, it is to offer the means for persons to examine, confront, clarify and reassess their understanding of life, the problems encountered throughout their life, and the limits imposed upon the possibilities inherent in being-in-the-world.

Existential psychotherapists de-emphasize any directly generated ‘curative’ aims and place little value on any specific manipulative or re-educational techniques that seek to modify current behaviour. For existential psychotherapists, what other models have labelled as neurotic or psychotic defence mechanisms are more accurately understood as inter-relationally imposed blocks against authentic living brought on by the person’s desire to deny and avoid the necessary angst that the possibilities of authentic living present to his or her general way of being, or worldview.

In order to emphasize that the role of the existential psychotherapist is not principally a medical/curative one, but, rather, that of stimulus to honest and revealing investigation of one’s inter-relationally-derived worldview, existential psychotherapists refer to their patients as ‘clients’. All this is not

to say that clients might not emerge from therapy ‘cured’ of any number of symptoms or having learned how to modify their behaviour for their own ‘betterment’ – obviously this occurs in existential psychotherapy just as it does in most other therapeutic approaches – but this is not its primary aim or concern. Rather, as Emmy van Deurzen-Smith has put it:

The existential approach to counselling centres on an exploration of someone’s particular way of seeing life, the world and herself. The goal is to help her to establish what it is that matters to her, so that she can begin to feel more in tune with herself and therefore more real and alive. Before the person can rearrange her lifestyle in accordance with her priorities she has to examine her own preconceptions and assumptions which stand in the way of her personal development. Much of what has always been taken for granted is therefore re-examined in the light of a search for truth about life. (1988: 27)

THE EXPLORATION OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

Common to the various ‘attitudes’ within existential psychotherapy is the acknowledged emphasis placed upon the exploration of clients’ consciousness and experience of being-in-the-world. In this way, clients’ various embodied attitudes, values, beliefs, choices or assumptions regarding what it means and how it is for them to exist in and engage with themselves, others and the world in general can be exposed, examined, challenged and reconsidered in relation to the problems encountered throughout their lives, and the limits imposed upon the possibilities inherent in being-in-the-world.

This clarification of the client’s worldview highlights the various worldview constituents’ inter-relationship with, and impact upon, one another. From this perspective, the client’s problematic presenting symptoms or disturbances cannot be isolated, or considered on their own, in isolation from the rest of the client’s various “ways of being”. Rather, it is argued, they reflect the wider possibilities and limitations of the client’s chosen inter-relational stance toward both self and others (or “the world” in general).

ATTITUDINAL QUALITIES IN EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

The existential psychotherapist's task centres upon a number of fundamental attitudes that are derived from phenomenological inquiry. In brief, these require the therapist to make the attempt to

1. Set aside, or bracket, his or her own beliefs, theories, biases and assumptions;
2. emphasize and explore the client's immediate conscious experience of "being-with-another" (the therapist);
3. focus the investigation upon its descriptive components rather than rely upon theory-driven interpretations.

This focus upon a descriptive attunement toward the lived world of the client forces existential psychotherapists to recognize that they are no longer able to be the detached objective observer/explorer/clarifier of some facets of their clients' lived reality. Rather, the existential psychotherapist is implicated via the inquiry in a way that the encounter between therapist and client, while undeniably focused upon the client, is, nonetheless, mutually revelatory. For both client and therapist, the encounter permits a conscious reflection of "this is what and how it is to be who I am being in this relation".

For the existential psychotherapist, the act of listening to the client is focused upon the client's self/world relations. In this way, the client's statements, concerns and disclosures are not considered in isolation but, rather, as implicit or explicit inter-relational statements that reveal the possibilities and limitations of being that emerge for the client through his or her values, beliefs, judgmental attitudes and affects.

The existential psychotherapist's task is not one of seeking to impose a directive change or to ameliorate the lived inter-relational world of the client, but, rather, to attempt to clarify it so that its explicit, implicit, and fixed or sedimented assumptions, values, and beliefs can be re-examined and reconsidered. In turn, this attempt reveals those disowned or dissociated experiences, thoughts, behaviours and affects that serve to maintain the client's current worldview, even if these are experienced as being problematic, undesirable or even seriously debilitating symptoms.

THE DIMENSIONS OF WORLD-VIEWS

How can existential psychotherapists assist clients in clarifying their world-views? One highly influential therapist, Ludwig Binswanger (1963), argued that an individual's world-view can be seen to consist of three dimensions: the *Umwelt*, the *Mitwelt*, and the *Eigenwelt*.

The *Umwelt* can best be described as the 'natural world with its physical, biological dimension' (van Deurzen-Smith, 1988: 69). Although each of us is limited by innate, biological invariants, we still provide unique meanings and interpretations of the physical world we inhabit. We might experience this physical dimension as being essentially harmonious, secure and pleasurable, or it may fill us with anxiety due to perceived dangers, doubts, injustices and so forth. Our attitudes to a wide range of variables within the physical dimension – our bodies, the weather, ecological variables and so on – rather than being seen as insignificant when mentioned in therapy, are duly examined and considered as valuable means to clarifying clients' meanings and concerns.

The *Mitwelt* dimension focuses on the everyday, public relations each of us has with others. The inferences each of us draws about our race, social class, gender, language, culture, the rules and codes of our society (and those who enforce those rules), our general work environments – all may lead us to develop a wide range of differing attitudes and values. We might feel empowered or invalidated by our public-world interactions, they may engender feelings of acceptance or rejection, dominance or submission, conformity or rebellion. The public world might be perceived as loving and respectful, or petty, spiteful and dangerous to the point where it must be avoided whenever possible. Once again, clients' stated perceptions of their dealings with the public world demand attention and investigation.

The *Eigenwelt* deals with the private and intimate relations each of us has with both ourselves and the significant others in our lives. How we view ourselves, the degree of self-confidence, self-acceptance and individuality we define for ourselves is an obvious area of concern as is the way we interpret our interactions with our family, friends, sexual partners – those 'intimate' beings in our lives upon whom we place so much significance and importance, and who seem to have the power to make our lives

seem meaningful or meaningless, rich or arid, full or empty, secure or wracked with anxiety.

In addition to these three dimensions, a fourth – the *Überwelt* – has been suggested by van Deurzen-Smith (1988). This dimension ‘*refers to a person’s connection to the abstract and absolute aspect of living*’ (van Deurzen-Smith, 1988: 97) and incorporates our ideological outlook on life, the beliefs we hold about life, death, existence – those beliefs which underpin or are a basis for all subsequent beliefs and interpretations. In voicing such attitudes and beliefs, clients are invited to examine and assess them more carefully, more honestly, in order that they might either ‘own’ them (perhaps for the first time in their lives) or come to realize that they can do so no longer and are in a position to consider and confront what beliefs they do hold.

All the above dimensions are open to investigation and clarification; in doing so clients confront the attitudes, assumptions and values they place upon each and, as a result, are more likely to make sense of the problematic ‘symptoms’ in their lives as extensions of, or defensive reactions to, any of these dimensions.

FOUR INTER-RELATIONAL REALMS OF DESCRIPTIVE INQUIRY

A related, though to my mind much more explicitly inter-relational, approach toward the investigation of the client’s worldview has been suggested and developed by me in various papers and texts (Spinelli, 1994, 1997). This way of examination focuses initially upon four distinct inter-relational realms.

The first of these realms, “I-focused” inquiry, considers those views, statements, opinions, beliefs, demands, and affective feelings that express the client’s experience of being him/herself in the current encounter with the therapist. The I-focused realm of encounter attempts to describe and clarify ‘my experience of being “myself” in any given relationship’. It asks, in effect, ‘what do I tell myself about my current experience of being me in this encounter?’

The second, “You-focused” realm, considers those views, statements, opinions, beliefs, demands, and affective feelings that the client places upon the other (the therapist) in the current encounter. The You-focused realm of encounter attempts to describe

and clarify ‘my experience of “the other” being in relation with me’. It asks, in effect, ‘what do I tell myself about my experience of the other in any given encounter?’

The third realm, the “We-focused” realm, concerns itself with the explication of those facets of currently lived experience that emerge from the immediacy of current experience between client and therapist and that come into being via the encounter itself. The We-focused realm of encounter attempts to describe and clarify each participant’s (i.e. the client’s and the psychotherapist’s) experience of ‘us’ being in relation with one another. In short, it asks each to consider ‘what do I tell myself about the experience of being us being in relation with each other while being engaged in this encounter?’ The We-focused realm of encounter is characterised by its immediacy – it is concerned with, and expresses, that which is being experienced “in the moment” of engagement with the other from a person-to-person standpoint. As such, it expresses explicitly that inter-relational grounding that exists (and is more implicitly expressed) in I-focused and You-focused statements.

Finally, the They-focused realm of encounter centres upon the client’s experience of how those who make up his or her wider world of ‘others’ (extending beyond the other who is the psychotherapist) experience their own inter-relational realms in response to the client’s current way of being and, as well, to the novel ways of being that have presented themselves as possibilities to the client through psychotherapy. In brief, it asks the client to consider his or her way of being from the perspective of the ‘others’ in the client’s world. Specifically, it challenges the client to consider the various facets of inter-relations between the client and these others as the client imagines they experience and interpret them. Further, it challenges the client to consider his or her worldview from the standpoint of the various facets of inter-relation between one other or group of others and a different other or group of others. The They-focused realm serves to extend the ‘world-dimensions’ of the therapeutic relationship beyond the confines of the consulting room. It is an explicit stance that can be adopted by existential psychotherapists to highlight the inter-relational dimensions of existence and to counter the more common psychotherapeutic tendency to consider the client in isolation, out of inter-relational context. The exploration of this fourth

relational realm is particularly significant when, through therapy, the client has reached a point of considering and making choices about new found alternative “ways to be”.

While existential psychotherapy attempts a descriptive exploration of all four realms of encounter in order that the therapist can attempt to “stand beside”, remain open to and in part ‘enter’, with increasing adequacy, the currently-lived world of the client, an explicit and overriding emphasis is placed upon the third (We-focused) realm (Spinelli, 1994, 1997, 2001, 2003). The existential psychotherapist’s willingness to examine and consider what emerges experientially through this realm as being real and valid (rather than substitutive, symbolic, or ‘transferential’) serves to implicate his or her current manner of existence as expressed through the relationship with the client. Further, this focus serves to expose and clarify in the immediacy of the current encounter the self-same inter-relational issues that clients express as being deeply problematic within their wider world relations.

THE CLIENT’S WAY OF BEING IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

The examination and clarification of the four inter-relational realms serve to highlight the client’s worldview both within the therapeutic relationship and, with regard to the client’s wider world-relations with self and others. At times, the client’s experience of being with the therapist parallels his or her world-relational experiences of being. Just as significantly, however, the client’s experienced way of being with the therapist may well contrast with his or her wider world relations and, in this way, serves to challenge both the sedimentations and dissociations concerning who and how “I am expected or required to be (and not be) with others” or “how others are expected or required to be (and not be) with me”.

In this way, existential psychotherapy can be most accurately construed as a structured form of reconstitutive inquiry in that it attempts to clarify that which is initially presented in a confused and fragmented fashion. By such acts of collaborative and clarifying dialogue, existential psychotherapy provides the potential for transformative experience.

Existential psychotherapy’s insistence upon the inter-relational basis to all lived experience asks

of the therapist and client to undertake a form of inquiry that places the client’s subjective experience within an inter-relational framework that requires the acknowledgement of others. Within the therapeutic relationship, the therapist is the other in the client’s current experience of being. As this other, the therapist acts as both the representative of all others in the client’s wider world relations and, just as importantly, is also the other who challenges the client’s worldview regarding others and their impact upon his or her way of being.

In focusing upon the various inter-relational realms, both the complementary and the symmetrical patterns of behaviour adopted by the client in order to maintain his or her worldview become clarified, just as the underlying embodied values, beliefs, meanings and felt experiences attached to such stances are more adequately discerned. But, it is apparent, that rather than specific behavioural skills or techniques, it is the existential psychotherapist him/herself who provokes this challenging form of enquiry.

THE EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPIST’S WAY OF BEING IN THERAPY

On reflection, it becomes evident that any hope of achieving this enterprise must begin from a standpoint of openness to and acceptance of the client’s presenting way of being on the part of the therapist. To adopt any other stance which emphasises a directive or manipulative change in the client’s way of being, no matter how benevolent or concerned to ameliorate the client’s distress, will only serve to maintain the client’s underlying currently lived way of being toward self and others and, in turn, will allow the client to continue to avoid reflecting upon all clarificatory challenges initiated by the therapist.

It is via this first, and crucial, step of “staying with” and “attuning oneself to” the client’s currently lived worldview – no matter how debilitating, restrictive, limiting, and irrational it may appear to be to the therapist (if not all others in the client’s world) that the existential psychotherapist, simply via this client-attuned presence, begins to challenge profoundly the client’s expectations regarding how others are, how others expect the client to be, and how the client expects others to be with him or her.

Such attempts which the great existential psychiatrist,

Karl Jaspers termed not-knowing (Jaspers, 1963) and which, more recently, I have myself referred to as un-knowing (Spinelli, 1997) make it the aim of the existential psychotherapist to seek to discern that which is understandable within what is initially experienced as being un-understandable.

Once the therapist's presence has begun to provoke a more open, honest clarifying process of worldview exploration by the client, then the therapist has earned sufficient trust to be able to focus upon the exploration of the client's experience of being with a particular 'other' (the therapist) so that the experiential immediacy of their current encounter can be considered in terms of the experiential resonances and contrasts it provokes with regard to the client's wider worldview. This dialogical process can then permit the inter-relational meaning of the client's perceived dysfunctions and disturbances to be more clearly explicated and reconsidered.

In adopting this stance, existential psychotherapy avoids bestowing upon the therapist the role of superior, objective instructor who distinguishes for the client those beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that are assumed to be 'irrational' and who attempts to replace them with 'rational' ones. Similarly, rather than present themselves as 'symptom-removers', 'treatment-providers', 'directive educators' or 'professional helpers', existential psychotherapists return psychotherapy to its original meaning: the attempt to "stay with", "stand beside" or attend to another. In attending to their clients, existential psychotherapists thereby make the attempt to provide them with the experience of being heard – and hearing themselves – in a manner that is non-judgmental and accepting of the stance they maintain. This attempt "to accept the otherness of being who is present" promotes the possibility of the clients' greater willingness and courage to confront the fixed, or sedimented, biases and assumptions they hold with regard to their relations with themselves, others and the world in general, and how these sedimented stances may themselves have provoked their current problems in living.

THE EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPIST'S ATTEMPTS TO 'BE-WITH' AND 'BE-FOR' THE CLIENT

In order to assist clients in their investigation of their worldviews as optimally as possible, existential

psychotherapists attempt a stance of openness and acceptance of the "being there" of the client.

In their attempts at being-with the client, existential psychotherapists seek to give expression to their respect for and acceptance of their client's worldview as it presents itself in their current encounter.

In their attitude of being-for their clients, existential psychotherapists express their willingness to attempt a non-judgemental, descriptively-focused entry into that worldview in order to disclose, together with their client, the underlying, often implicit and inadequately acknowledged, values, beliefs, assumptions, attitudinal stances and their accompanying felt, affective components that make up or provide a meaning-focused structure to the client's worldview.

While neither the attempt to be-with or be-for the client can ever be fully achieved, and remains an aim or attempt rather than an fulfilment, nonetheless the undertaking may well provoke one of the biggest challenges that the client is likely to experience: here is another who is not trying to distort, subvert, interpret, amend, impose upon the lived worldview but who rather is making the attempt to accept it as it presents itself in the immediacy of the inter-relational encounter.

Equally, through the attempt to be-with and be-for their clients, existential psychotherapists become better able to attempt the bracketing of their own meanings and interpretations of the world so as not to make it their task to value, judge or criticize their clients' experience, nor to instruct their clients as to how to live out their lives in ways which imitate and have the approval of their therapist.

Existential psychotherapists must maintain this awareness of the wide range of existential possibilities available to their clients and have the integrity (not to say humility) to allow their clients to arrive at their own decisions and make their own choices about how to live their lives. This, in turn, requires therapists to have a substantial degree of self-knowledge so that they are more aware of the biases and assumptions in their own lives in order to be better able to bracket them.

Similarly, existential psychotherapists attempt to bracket any personal feelings or attitudes that move them away from an open, non-possessive respect towards their clients' existential autonomy and integrity. They do not seek to impose or concede their own or their clients' inter-relational demands that are above and beyond the specific contractual

conditions set down and agreed upon during their first session together.

A common example of such unacceptable demands is time. As has often been noted, a wealth of 'important' insights tend to occur to clients during the last few minutes of a session, making it 'reasonable' for clients to demand extra time in order to explore them. Various approaches have hypothesized the hidden or unconscious significance of this phenomenon. While not being categorical as to its true meaning, existential psychotherapists are in agreement with most other therapeutic approaches in their typical (though not totally inflexible) refusal to go along with such time-extensions either throughout the duration of the therapeutic contract or until such a point in the contract when both participants are better able to re-negotiate such amendments via the relationship itself. Readers particularly interested in these questions might find it useful to read my forthcoming text dealing with the practice of existential psychotherapy.

THE EMPHASIS ON DESCRIPTIVE QUESTIONING

In the pursuance of the broad aims of existential psychotherapy, and in keeping with its underlying assumptions, questions posed to their clients will rarely begin with *why*, since attempts to answer such questions inevitably lead to theories and speculation on the clients' (and therapists') part, concerning hypothetical originating past 'causes'.

Rather, in focusing on questions having to do with the "what and how" of experience (that is, the noematic and noetic foci of intentionality) existential psychotherapists seek to assist their clients in striving to focus on their currently experienced conscious experience of being-in-the-world. In this way, it is argued, clients can more easily reflect upon their experience as it is occurring in the encounter rather than be generating unprovable hypotheses as to how they might have dealt with or understood their experience at various points in the past or would like to some time in the future.

This emphasis on the clarification of descriptive experience allows for more adequate and honest conclusions to emerge and increases the likelihood that clients will recognize the elastic nature of their experience and, thereby, re-acknowledge

their role as active interpreters of, rather than passive reactors to, the 'givens' of life.

THE THERAPIST AS 'ATTENDANT'

As R. D. Laing has noted, the term 'therapist' is originally derived from a Greek word meaning 'attendant' (Evans, 1976: xlix) and, as such, a therapist should be a specialist in attentiveness and awareness. Existential psychotherapists explicitly remind their clients that, ultimately, the task remains up to them – the clients – to find their own meanings and truths, and, hence, to realize their role and responsibility in the choices they have made and will continue to make throughout their lives.

Unfortunately, one of the greatest obstacles encountered by the existential psychotherapist is that the vast majority of clients wish neither to hear nor to accept this argument. Most individuals who seek therapy have convinced themselves that someone else (the therapist) knows better than they how to live out their lives. Feeling powerless, often expressing a deep self-hatred and loathing, such individuals want to be told what to do, who to be, how to change for the better, what technique they need to be taught in order to improve a particular aspect of their lives (for example, sexual dysfunctions, phobias, self-assertion and so on) or their lives in general so that they will somehow, magically, emerge 'cured'.

No therapist who adopts an existential-phenomenological orientation can claim to provide such results solely and directly; what can be achieved through existential psychotherapy, however, is the realization that such demands are impossible to satisfy and, more importantly, both limit and impair the client's experience of being-in-the-world.

THE EMPHASIS ON EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY

Existential psychotherapists take the experience of anxiety to be a fundamental 'given' of being-in-the-world. The responses that individuals raise up in order to minimize, deny or repress intolerable levels of anxiety are, in themselves, central factors in subsequent experiences of sedimentation and dissociation, confusion, learned helplessness and

denial of freedom. In other words, the great variety of unwanted and unpleasantly experienced “symptoms” that clients want to be cured of are themselves defences against the acceptance of the various existential anxieties of being-in-the-world: nothingness, meaninglessness, isolation and so forth.

As such, it is not the “treatment” of these symptoms that is central but, rather, it is the reconsideration of one’s defensive, limiting beliefs that is the focus of existential psychotherapy. As Yalom has stated: ‘*Existential psychotherapy is a dynamic approach to therapy which focuses on concerns that are rooted in the individual’s existence*’ (1980: 5). The existential focus does not dispute that an individual’s fears, denials and anxieties are likely to be operating at different levels of awareness. Nevertheless, its primary interest lies in the exploration and clarification of current conscious experience and the perceived conflicts inferred from this experience.

Unlike other therapeutic approaches, the existential stance argues that the sources of conflict in an individual’s life are not due to instinctual demands that are not being sufficiently met or that are in conflict with opposing demands, nor are they directly due to conflicts with significant others, or to misunderstood, incomplete or improper learning experiences, but, rather, they lie with the ontological ‘givens’ of human inter-relational existence such as temporality, freedom, encounter, and meaning/meaninglessness, and the degree to which each individual responds to these either to minimize or to deny the anxiety they provoke via the construction and adoption of his or her worldview.

In his valuable text, *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980), Irvin Yalom explores at length the various defences that might arise in response to the anxiety provoked by each of the existential ‘givens’. Interested readers are strongly urged to refer to this text for its detailed analyses of these defences.

Let me just outline the types of symptoms that Yalom argues might arise from an individual’s death anxiety. Yalom posits that there are essentially two modes of defending against this most basic of anxieties. One way is to convince oneself of one’s ‘*specialness and personal inviolability*’ (Yalom, 1980: 115). That is to say, we might logically accept that, like everyone else, we will die at some point, but this rational understanding may be met with a more powerful, opposite belief that, whereas others may be doomed to die, we are somehow

different, more important, ‘special’, and, as such, will be spared this fate. In order to convince themselves of their unique status, some individuals will enact all manner of ‘death-defying’ symptoms. For instance, the compulsive heroism characteristic of a writer such as Hemingway reveals the recurring need in such individuals to ‘prove’ this conclusion to themselves by testing themselves in more and more dangerous situations.

Equally, the workaholic, as well as being motivated by desires of ‘getting on top of things’, is convinced that no one else is capable of doing the work as successfully, or knowledgeably as he or she can. If no one else can match these set standards, the workaholic individual becomes more convinced of his or her indispensability – the world could not possibly survive their death.

Like the compulsive hero and the workaholic, the narcissist, the autocratic controller, the aggressor, all place their desires and abilities to control, determine, manipulate their world at centre stage. The power they convince themselves they have acts as a means to a deeper conviction: the more ‘god-like’ they appear to be to others and to themselves, then, like ‘god’, the more they can view themselves as immortal.

The other defensive road taken against death anxiety is characterized by Yalom as being that of ‘The Ultimate Rescuer’ (Yalom, 1980: 129-141). This ultimate rescuer may be perceived as a supernatural entity or force which guides, watches over and protects us at all times, which is omnipresent, and which often bestows ‘ultimate’ reward or punishment upon us. Most importantly, this version of the ultimate rescuer minimizes the power of death, reducing its finality to a mere turning point, or step, into another realm of experience. Alternatively, the ultimate rescuer need not be a supernatural entity, but another, albeit superior, human being. Religious and political leaders, charismatic personalities, the very personifiers of a cause or movement, may all be perceived as ultimate rescuers.

In either case, the ultimate rescuer fulfils the function of rule-maker, law-giver and meaning-creator. If we believe in the words and deeds of the ultimate rescuer, if we follow the ultimate rescuer’s ordinances, we gain an existential security: the world becomes an easy place to understand, all questions have their answers, our life is placed under the control of the ultimate rescuer whom we seek to emulate and serve and demonstrate unswerving

ving allegiance to – even to the point of giving up our own life in his service.

If death has meaning and purpose, if it offers the promise of something better or finer, then it becomes more acceptable, less anxiety-provoking; it is the thought that death has no meaning, leads to nothing, that is unbearable and which the ultimate rescuer allows us to deny.

The price we pay for our beliefs in an ultimate rescuer is, of course, the loss of a great deal of what freedom we possess. Not allowed to think certain thoughts, to hold certain desires or to enact certain behaviours because they are contrary to the dictates of the ultimate rescuer, we lay ourselves open to a wide range of symptoms: masochism and depression, hysteria and fanaticism, obsession and ritual, may all follow from this defensive act.

Beliefs in our ‘specialness’ and beliefs in an ultimate rescuer often intermingle. While we can separate these beliefs for the purposes of discussion and analysis in a textbook, in real life it is not uncommon to note both influencing the behaviour of the same individual. We commonly tend, or gravitate, more or less to one defensive stance rather than towards the other, but both can and do coexist – after all, they share the same function and purpose.

THE ANTI-MEDICAL STANCE IN EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

In keeping with their view that the symptoms of mental disturbance are expressions of an individual’s attempts to defend against central existential anxieties, existential psychotherapists argue that the problems of mental disturbances are principally rooted in socio-ethical bases rather than in medical ones; that medical forms of intervention and treatment at best provide only temporary alleviation from anxiety and, at worst, may induce an even greater psychic breakdown in the sufferer; and that, rather than being random, meaningless confusion, the behaviour of the disturbed individual is meaningful and revelatory of the anxieties that are being defended against.

This stance is perhaps the most far-reaching and controversial arrived at by existential psychotherapy since it contradicts the more generally advocated view that all symptoms are the direct outcome of physical illness and are to be treated as one would treat any other medical problem.

While some practitioners might be willing to concede that many neurotic symptoms may be tied to defences against the various “problems of living” dealt with by existential psychotherapists and, as such, a neurotic might benefit from such therapy, they are likely to balk at the notion that more severe forms of mental disturbance – the various psychoses, including schizophrenia – may also have their origins in these same anxieties and, like most neurotic symptoms, serve as meaningful if disturbing and excessively limited responses to these anxieties.

Existential psychotherapists have tended to react strongly against the “physical disease” model of the mind and the reliance upon physical methods of treatments such as surgical, electrical and drug therapies that have become the norm in most Western hospitals. Similarly, existential psychotherapists downplay the overwhelming importance that their physicalist colleagues ascribe to bio-genetic factors in mental disturbance. Instead, many argue that while there may well be correlates between certain mental disturbances and the bio-genetic make-up of the individual, such factors are not in themselves directly causative of the wide-ranging variety and strength of individual responses to such stimuli. Existential psychotherapists argue that, rather than being problems open to medical treatment, mental disturbances reveal primarily “being”-related issues.

EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY: A SUMMARY

Within the existential psychotherapeutic relationship, the therapist is the other who serves a representative of all others in the client’s wider world relations. But, just as importantly, the therapist is also the other who challenges the client’s beliefs and assumptions regarding others and their impact upon his or her way of being.

The significance of this “dual-otherness” on the part of the therapist provokes strong resonances with the notion of *schismogenesis* first introduced by Gregory Bateson (Parks, 1999). As Tim Parks explains in a recent article dealing with Bateson’s ideas evolved while observing the radically different complementary and the symmetrical patterns of behaviour adopted males and females of the Iatmul Indians. Bateson noted that the inflexibility inherent

in schismogenesis was both a powerful and damaging process ‘not only because it tended to violent extremes, but also because it could deny an individual any experience outside that promoted by this social dynamic’. (Parks, 1999: 43). In order to “correct” the destabilizing impact of schismogenesis, and thereby return some degree of stability to the tribe, its members were required to enact a bizarre series of highly specialized rituals which were referred to as *Naven*.

I would like to suggest, as an overall conclusion, that existential psychotherapy provides a series of “Naven-like” encounters designed to expose the schismogenetic processes adopted by clients. In focusing upon the various inter-relational realms, both the complementary and the symmetrical patterns of behaviour adopted by clients in order to maintain their sense of “self” and distinguish it from that of “others” become clarified, just as the underlying meanings attached to such stances are more adequately discerned. But, it is apparent, that rather than specific behavioural skills or techniques, it is the existential psychotherapist him/herself who provokes the “Naven experience” via being the other who both reveals and challenges the client’s schismogenetic patterns of being – initially, within the confines of the therapeutic relationship and, consequently, within the client’s wider world relations.

But this Naven enterprise must begin from a standpoint of acceptance of the client’s current way of being. To adopt any other stance, no matter how benevolent or concerned to ameliorate the client’s distress will only serve to maintain the client’s sedimented way of being toward self and others. It is via this first, and crucial, step of “staying with” and “attuning oneself to” the client’s currently lived worldview that the existential psychotherapist begins to challenge profoundly the client’s expectations regarding how others are, how others expect the client to be, and how the client expects others to be with him or her. Once the therapist’s presence has begun to provoke a more open, honest clarifying process of worldview exploration by the client, the experiential immediacy of their current encounter can be considered in terms of the experiential resonances and contrasts it provokes with regard to the client’s wider worldview. This dialogical process can then permit the inter-relational meaning of the client’s perceived dysfunctions and disturbances to be more clearly explicated and reconsidered.

REFERENCES

- Binswanger, L. (1963). *Being-in-the-World: selected papers of Ludwig Binswanger*. trans. J. Needleman. New York: Harper Torchbooks.
- Cohn, H. W. (1997). *Existential Thought and Therapeutic Practice*. London: Sage.
- Cohn, H. W. (2002). *Heidegger and the Roots of Existential Therapy*. London: Continuum.
- Cohn, H. W., & du Plock, S. (Eds.) (1995). *Existential Challenges to Psychotherapeutic Theory and Practice*. London: SEA Press.
- Condrau, G. (1998). *Martin Heidegger’s Impact on Psychotherapy*. Vienna: Mosaic.
- Cooper, M. (2003). *Existential Therapies*. London: Sage.
- Deurzen-Smith, E. van (1988). *Existential Counselling in Practice*. London: Sage.
- Deurzen-Smith, E. van (1997). *Everyday Mysteries*. London: Routledge.
- du Plock, S. (Ed.) (1997). *Case Studies in Existential Psychotherapy and Counselling*. Chichester: Wiley.
- du Plock, S. (Ed.) (2002). *Further Existential Challenges to Psychotherapeutic Theory and Practice*. London: SEA Press.
- Evans, R. I. (1976). *Dialogue with R. D. Laing*. New York: Praeger, 1981.
- Jaspers, K. (1963). *General Psychopathology*, vol 1. Trans. J. Hoenig and M. W. Hamilton. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Misiak, H., & Sexton, V. S. (1973). *Phenomenological, Existential, and Humanistic Psychologies: A Historical Survey*. New York: Grune & Stratton.
- Parks, D. (1999). Unlocking the mind’s manacles. *New York Review of Books*, Oct 7, 43-48.
- Ruitenbeek, H. M. (Ed.) (1962). *Psychoanalysis and Existential Philosophy*. New York: Dutton.
- Spinelli, E. (1994). *Demystifying Therapy*. London: Constable.
- Spinelli, E. (1997). *Tales of Un-Knowing: therapeutic encounters from an Existential Perspective*. London: Duckworth.
- Spinelli, E. (2001). *The Mirror and The Hammer: challenges to therapeutic orthodoxy*. London: Sage.
- Spinelli, E. (2003). The existential-phenomenological paradigm. In W. Dryden Woolfe, & S. Strawbridge (Eds.), *Handbook of Counselling Psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 180-198). London: Sage.
- Strasser, F. (1999). *Emotions: experiences in existential psychotherapy and life*. London: Duckworth.
- Strasser, F., & Strasser, A. (1997). *Existential Time-Limited Therapy: the wheel of existence*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Yalom, I. (1980). *Existential Psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books.

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an introductory overview of the

key ideas that underpin existential psychotherapy from the primary focus of inter-relation. Further, it introduces various applications regarding the investigation of the inter-relational variables that accentuate the client's experience of being-in-the world and considers these in relation to the analysis of the client's presenting problems and issues. Finally, the paper argues that in the existential psychotherapeutic relationship the therapist can be likened to a particular and unique "other" in the client's world relations.

Key words: Worldview, phenomenological inquiry, four realms of descriptive inquiry, being-with and being-for, schismogenesis.

RESUMO

Este texto proporciona uma visão global introdutória das ideias chave que consubstanciam a psicoterapia existencial a partir da noção central de inter-relação. Além disso, apresenta várias aplicações relativamente à investigação das variáveis inter-relacionais que acentuam a experiência de *ser-no-mundo* e considera estas em relação com a análise dos problemas e assuntos apresentados pelo cliente. Finalmente, o artigo argumenta que na relação psicoterapêutica existencial, o terapeuta pode ser comparado com um particular e único "outro" nas relações do mundo do cliente.

Palavras-chave: Mundo da vida, inquérito fenomenológico, quatro esferas do inquérito descritivo, ser-com e ser-para, cismogénese.